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A Culture on a Loop: Baltimore

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HIST 388: US History Since 1945

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Abstract

Police brutality has been at the fore front of American consciousness for almost a decade now. Numerous African Americans all over the country, both male and female, have lost their lives in situations where that end result was not justified. In response to each of these individual tragic events, peaceful protests rose up to demand for justice. After the death of Freddie Gray in April of 2015, however, Baltimore had a more aggressive response to the loss of one of their native sons. An initial peaceful protest turned into riot that raged through the streets of Baltimore for a series of days. This expression was condemned almost universally by the media, with little effort in attempting to understand what was being said. As evidenced through the expression of the people's frustration, it was clear that Baltimore has had tension building up between citizens and police dating back all the way to the early 1900s. When Baltimore's history, the Moynihan Report, and the Kerner Commission Report are all examined together, they tell a history of oppression that have caused the suffering of African Americans in many cities all over the country. Until this systemic racism is rid of, these communities and populations will continue to live on their loop.

On February 26, 2012, 17 year old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by neighborhood watch captain. George Zimmerman, while on his way to his father's house in Sanford, Florida.¹ The local community was furious that an unarmed innocent teen was shot and killed. Ultimately, Zimmerman was not charged, causing a greater rift between the African American community and police.² The incident that occurred in Florida was thought to be a single event. However, over the next four years, places such as Ferguson, Staten Island, and Charleston have also seen similar events take place.³ Like the case of Trayvon Martin, each event was met with protests from not only the local community, but also across the nation.

Baltimore was also one of the communities to face such a situation. On April 19, 2015, 25-year-old Freddie Gray was pronounced dead after suffering a spinal injury while in police custody.⁴ Unlike the scenarios in communities before it, Baltimore reacted much differently. The initial peaceful protests eventually escalated into a raging riot that lasted for a period of days. The riots seemed to call for something deeper than justice for the deaths of unarmed African Americans. These riots suggested that a deep tension had developed between African Americans and police for some time, and the death of Freddie Gray pushed the community over the edge.

By examining the history of Baltimore and the warning put forth by the Moynihan Report and Kerner Commission Report, this deep rooted anger and hostility can be understood and allow us to explain the systemic racism that affects not only Baltimore, but also other cities around the country. After the roots of the systemic racism are understood, only then policy makers and society move toward fixing the legislature that is maintaining systemic racism.

¹Kuo, Vivian. "Florida Teen's Shooting by Watchman Questioned." CNN. March 13, 2012. Accessed November 21, 2016.

²Ibid

³Hermann, Peter, and John Woodrow Cox. "A Freddie Gray Primer: Who Was He, How Did He Die, Why Is There so Much Anger?" Washington Post. April 28, 2015. Accessed November 22, 2016.

⁴ Ibid

As far as we know, Baltimore's tension begins in 1910, when an African American student at Yale purchased a home in a white American neighborhood.⁵ The surrounding neighborhoods were appalled. The *New York Times* wrote numerous articles documenting the resulting legislation that responded to white Americans' concerns. Specifically, Baltimore passed a residential segregation ordinance, which aimed to restrict the areas in which African Americans were able to buy homes. "The Democratic majority will likely adopt the ordinance, which is the result of the depreciating effect on property values in the residential section by the blacks becoming tenants therein."⁶ According to the article, property values were lowered anywhere from 30 to 50%. The implication of this segregation ordinance would keep the races separated in their own neighborhoods, thus allowing each race to live amongst themselves without affecting each others' livelihood. The Baltimore Council, who was responsible for implementing this legislation, claimed "unless some early and effective solution is found more friction and disorder between the races will result."⁷ The council believed that this was the only option to ensure the happiness of both races.

A later article in the *New York Times* explained the drastic difference between the two neighborhoods. George W. McMechen, an African American lawyer, explained how he and his business partner were approached to be bought out by local whites.⁸ McMechen explained, "We did not move up there because we wished to force our way among the whites... We merely desired to live in more commodious and comfortable quarters."⁹ McMechen's quote highlighted the difference between the race's sectors of living. White Americans were given living sectors with luxurious housing and high property values, while the segregation ordinance pushed African Americans to live in housing that was previously vacant. As

⁵Rothstein, Richard. "From Ferguson to Baltimore: The Fruits of Government Sponsored Segregation." May 15, 2015.

⁶Special to The New York Times. "TO SEGREGATE NEGRO HOMES." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Nov 22, 1910.

⁷Ibid

⁸BALTIMORE TRIES DRASTIC PLAN OF RACE SEGREGATION. (1910, Dec 25). *New York Times* (1857-1922)

⁹Ibid

McMechen alluded to, all Baltimore African Americans felt that an injustice was forced upon them but that they deserved the same rights and access to living quarters as white Americans.

Fast forward 15 years and the scene remains the same. In early January of 1926, a case was brought to the Supreme Court, challenging the contracts that allowed property owners to choose not to sell to a customer based on the buyer's race. This particular issue arose when a house which was formally in a white housing sector was sold to an African American. This broke the initial contract, and the case was sent back to the lower courts. When the courts ruled in favor of the upholding the contract, the NAACP joined forces with the party attempting to buy the property to appeal.¹⁰ The NAACP challenged the courts' ruling, declaring that the "constitutional guarantees of race equality had been violated." Louis Marshall spoke on behalf of the association and warned that if the decision was upheld and the sellers were enabled to choose not to sell to African Americans, it would only empower a "Klu Klux Klan program", and this sort of hate and segregation may spread to other groups around the country.¹¹

Segregation ordinances seemed to take a back seat in the American conscience once World War II began. During this time, many defense factories opened up around the country. A *New York Times* article written on September 5th, 1942, documented these factories opening up their doors to African American workers. These factories found themselves in the midst of a shortage of employees after the military draft. A. A. Liveright, a War Manpower Commission Director, urged these factories to not only hire more African Americans, but to also ensure that those already hired and working be given the opportunity to advance in their current job based on the amount of skill that they had.¹²

While World War II provided great opportunities for work for African Americans, it also came with major issues. Baltimore, like many other cities, became home for a massive migration of African Americans, thus putting pressure on the city to build the housing required for all of the new migrants. On July 23rd, 1943, *The New York Times* published an article titled "Baltimore Seeks New Negro Homes".

¹⁰PLEADS FOR NEGROES IN SUPREME COURT. (1926, Jan 09). *New York Times (1923-Current File)*

¹¹Ibid

¹²ORDERS JOBS FOR NEGROES. (1942, Sep 05). *New York Times (1923-Current File)*

This article outlined the problems that Baltimore faced after having a demand for workers. According to the article, around 200,000 African Americans made up the population of Baltimore during that time. That totals to around 20% of the city's population.¹³ Moreover, because of segregation ordinances and such, those same African Americans only had the option to live in areas that totaled to 4 square miles in radius out of 78.6 total square miles that the city of Baltimore had to offer.¹⁴ To clarify, this meant that 20% of Baltimore's population were living in only a fraction of Baltimore's total area. While Baltimore's African American communities' were already crowded, they were projected to become even more so as the city was expected around 2,000 more African Americans moving to the city daily in search for work.

This incredible concentration of people created a different set of problems for not only the community living in those areas, but the city as a whole. In Baltimore, African Americans were distributed around 58,000 people per square mile compared to white Americans who were distributed at 9,000 people per square mile.¹⁵ The areas suffering from these crowded conditions saw rises in illnesses (some of which caused death), crime, and arrests. "Every hour for twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, a Negro is taken into a police station and charged with some infraction of the law." Analyzing further, 54% of African American arrests were for common assault, 65% burglary, 83% assault with intent to kill, 82% for unlawful homicide, and 60% for assaults on police.¹⁶ Turner Catledge, the author of the article, reflected that the "assault on police" statistic was relatively new and was not previously heard of before. These descriptions and statistics of life as an African American during this time should have served as a warning.

In fact, a formal warning was issued toward the latter end of the 1943. In November of that very same year, United States Attorney General Francis Biddle expressed his concern of future riots to Baltimore African American lawyers.¹⁷ He is quoted by saying that he is "profoundly disturbed by ever-grow-

¹³Turner Catledge Special to New York Times. (1943, Jul 23). Baltimore Seeks New Negro Homes. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Biddle Sees Race Crisis. (1943, Nov 28). *New York Times (1923-Current File)*

ing racial tension” and the fact that a riot could erupt at “any moment”.¹⁸ He was also on record for suggesting that the Department of Justice should see to aide African Americans in instances where they were not being protected by their rights. Moreover, Biddle acknowledged five crucial factors that were affecting the relationship between the races: the contradiction between belief in democracy and the country’s actions, treatment of African American servicemen, general anxieties that come from war, shortage of police protection, and bad housing, as covered earlier in this analysis.

Through a brief analysis of African American history in Baltimore from 1910 to the 1940’s it is observed that the tension between the races had grown significantly after only those 30 years. In each decade, multiple public figures and statistics have spoken out against the potential repercussions of this oppression. In 1965, the Moynihan Report was released to the public revealing what the lives of African American’s ultimately looked like. While there is some controversy over some aspects of the report, its lessons on urbanization served as yet another warning that was left unheard.

The report seeks to show how African American family dynamics are responsible for the rapid growth of poverty. “A national effort is required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure.”¹⁹ While this claim is the reason that this report is deemed controversial, the affected areas that are examined are where today’s true value in the report lies. The report echoes what was said in *The New York Times* articles examined earlier, the crucial aspect of urbanization. The report reiterates the problems that occurred during the great migration. African American families seeking new opportunity for work, ultimately were left to live in areas of poverty, or “slums” as the report refers to them as.²⁰ Moynihan explains that this massive movement of people happened so quickly, that it disrupted normal family patterns, causing broken homes that ultimately led to crime, drugs, and other things of that

¹⁸Ibid

¹⁹Moynihan, Daniel P. "The Moynihan Report: An Annotated Edition." *The Atlantic*. March 1965. Accessed December 01, 2016.

²⁰Ibid

nature.²¹ Again, whether or not the family dynamics were the root of these harmful societal affects is true, Moynihan seemed to be correct when he said that the situations in the “slums” were getting worse.

Though the entirety of the Moynihan Report was rather controversial, the report's claim that the African American “slums” needed to be addressed was reinforced by the release of the Kerner Commission Report in early 1968. Due to the various rioting that had been occurring during throughout the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson assembled a panel to investigate the issues between the races. What the panel found through this report was that American society was heading toward two separate and distinct societies; one white and one black.²² Like the Moynihan Report, this claim came as a shock to the American people. Even more concerning was that the report also said that American cities were not prepared to deal with the rioting that was about to take place.

A *New York Times* article from March of 1968 detailed the reports findings. In a survey that the panel administered to major cities, 30 of those cities admitted that they had “serious deficiencies” in their police departments.²³ Some of those cities were also keeping a collection of lethal weapons and ignoring nonlethal weapons that should be used for riot control. This seemed to show how cities were so terrified of the riots, that they thought they should prepare for war rather than maintain civility. It is because of this militarization that the report feared that these major cities would begin to enforce an “urban apartheid,” enforcing segregation and taking away the personal freedom of all Americans, not only African Americans.²⁴ The Kerner Commission Report acknowledged that federal programs had been created to address African Americans in poverty. However, the panel found in their investigation that these programs only reached “a fraction” of the people they were trying to help because of “poor administration and inadequacy of funds.” To address the hostility that was being shown by members of poverty and African Americans, the country should focus on integrating them as much as possible, rather than marginalize them further. This was especially important because the African American population has projected to grow

²¹Ibid

²²By John Herbers. Special to The New York Times. “Riot Panel Fears U.S. May Develop 'Urban Apartheid'." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 03, 1968.

²³Ibid

²⁴Ibid

exponentially, up to 20.8 million by 1985, a 72% growth since 1966.²⁵ Along with that, the report claimed that this group, whose population was rapidly growing, had the highest unemployment rate in the country while also having the highest crime rate.²⁶ It is clear that some dynamic within the way that this population lives, for the tension between the two races has risen so much since the early 1900s, that it is now reaching the point where it is a cause of concern in the late 1960s that the races may separate from one another and live in their own separate societies.

Though the report seems somewhat damning of American culture in 1968, the report offers a course of action that the country could take to address the issue. First, the panel explored what would happen if the country stayed on its current course of action.²⁷ This would entail that the country having to continue using the current amount of resources to address the members of poverty. The report predicted that this choice would, "...lead to a larger number of violent incidents of the kind that have stimulated recent major disorders."²⁸ The panel added that because the African American population was growing in major cities, they would view this "deprivation" or lack of support as "justification for violent protest." This would then cause the white population to react, causing something of a racial apartheid to ensue.

According to the report, the best case scenario to fix the riots and avoid a racial apartheid is to "integrate" the two races. This would mean that racial barriers would be removed between the races, enriching the current African American slums so that they become one with the rest of society.²⁹ Lastly, the panel urged that the policies necessary to start this process must be implanted now, for if it is delayed, it will be "virtually impossible in 1985" due to the massive surplus of the population.

Focusing our attention back to Baltimore, we can see how both reports released in the 1960s can be applied to the present day. The warnings from both can be seen in major cities, such as Baltimore. To many, police brutality is a source of the modern riots all over the country. However, to the locals of Baltimore, their outrage is much deeper than that. It comes from 100 years of being marginalized and forced

²⁵Ibid

²⁶Ibid

²⁷Ibid

²⁸Ibid

²⁹Ibid

to live in segregated slums in cities. Emily Badger reviewed this history of pain in her article for the Washington Post after Freddie Gray's death. Titled, "The long, painful and repetitive history of how Baltimore became Baltimore", Badger described Baltimore's situation. She ultimately explains that Baltimore's community has suffered from a process of inequality that has been taking place for years by part of deliberate government policies, and the result being a community that has been targeted over and over again, making them weak in every aspect.³⁰

The important thing to realize is that Baltimore is no outlier, as Badger points out. Similar cycles have been noted in Atlanta, Chicago, and Richmond to name a few.³¹ The danger of this issue continuing to be unaddressed will result in yet another 100 years of the same cycle. We will watch our inner cities become enraged time and time again until our country decides to try a new or more intensive method of aid. The Kerner Commission report laid out a course of action that has yet to be tested, which was to build and empower the poverty in the inner cities so that they can reach the same level of society that exists in the suburbs. If no action is taken, then we will find ourselves in the same position that we were in during the late 1960's - an urban inequality where a class of citizens, who have been calling out for help since the 1920s, are left hopeless. If this history of warnings are ignored time and time again, then Baltimore and all other major cities will find themselves in a continuous loop until changes are finally made to remove the roots of systemic racism.

³⁰Badger, Emily. "The Long, Painful and Repetitive History of How Baltimore Became Baltimore." The Washington Post. April 29, 2015. Accessed December 3, 2016.

³¹Ibid.